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FM AMEMBASSY ASMARA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0223
INFO AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
CIA WASHDC
CJTF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ
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DIA WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000096

DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/AF, DS/TIA/ITA, DS/IP/SPC/SO, AF/E,
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/19/2029

TAGS: ASEC PGOV PREL ER

SUBJECT: SECURITY REPRESENTATIVES SHARE CRIME INFORMATION

REF: ASMARA 81

Classified By: CDA Melinda Tabler-Stone for Reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Post hosted a meeting of security officers and others who handle security affairs at their embassies. Topics of discussion included the rapid increase of crime in Asmara, food security in Eritrea, and reports of attacks outside of Asmara by insurgent groups. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) CRIME: RSO briefed everyone on increased reports of violent and non-violent crime in Asmara due to the plummeting economy and scarcity of food to include: an increase of assaults/muggings, sexual assaults, vehicle-related crimes, burglaries of occupied residences, and daytime burglaries. The Italian embassy security officer said there have been four burglaries at residences of Italian teachers within the last five weeks. The UK DCM stated her residence was burglarized three weeks ago while she was home and the ICRC representative said they had had two residential burglaries within the last few weeks. About half of these burglaries occurred while the occupants were at home, but no injuries were sustained. Other attendees talked about the increase in beggars knocking on the doors of unguarded residences asking for money or food, in some instances becoming combative when refused. Everyone agreed the police force comprises poorly paid conscripts, is plagued by lack of resources, appears apathetic towards criminal activity, and does not regularly patrol affluent residential neighborhoods.

¶3. (C) FOOD SECURITY: The group discussed food shortages in Asmara, the rapid increase in the price of staple items such as tomatoes and onions, and how it affects the stability of the Isaias regime. The EU representative stated that with a good rainy season, Eritrea can only supply 60% of its food requirements. The 2008 rainy season was poor and many farmers have sold off their work animals and other livestock in order to feed their families. There have also been numerous reports of Eritrean soldiers seizing produce/grains from farmers and from delivery trucks. The Norwegian management officer stated a ship arrived in Massawa last weekend with grain and approximately 360,000 tons of sugar purchased from Brazil. Sixty thousand tons will be for internal consumption, while the other 300,000 tons will be sold to Sudan. All attendees agreed the likelihood of riots or protests stemming from food shortages was low at this time due to the pervasive control of the Eritrean National Security Organization. Rather, the exodus of approximately 3000-5000 Eritreans per month would likely continue and help reduce simmering tensions.

¶4. (C) REPORTS OF ATTACKS OUTSIDE OF ASMARA: RSO discussed the continued reports of attacks in southwest Eritrea,

principally by the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama, and the difficulty in verifying these reported attacks due to travel restrictions and lack of police cooperation. ICRC stated it has been able to corroborate some of these reports through its field hospital in Barentu, which treated some victims, including those injured in Haicota (reftel). The UN security officer said he heard rumblings from military contacts that some of the attacks might have been instigated by the government as a way to maintain support of the populace by blaming insurgents or the Ethiopian government. The EU representative stated the EU had revised its travel policy to southwest Eritrea in light of the security situation.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: RSO regularly meets with the British, Israeli and UN security personnel. This expanded meeting of non-professional security representatives was useful in sharing information on various issues affecting the community. All attendees agreed to schedule at least quarterly meetings to address security concerns.

TABLER-STONE